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ARCHITECTURE AS BOTH A BOOK AND AN AUTHOR

A COMPARISON OF REVIVAL GOTHIC TO MEDIEVAL GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

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Architecture can play both passive and active roles in shaping society. For example, twelfth-century cultural beliefs coupled with technological advancements of the time drove the creation of the Gothic architectural style, while in the nineteenth century, the same style of architecture was used to influence culture and actively attempt to bring back the beliefs that the style once represented. An examination of the motives behind the creation of Medieval Gothic architecture and Revival Gothic architecture, this paper explores the different roles that architecture can play in shaping and recording history.

Architecture is not just a form of shelter. Through the years it can be seen as a book narrating the nations, cultures and societal changes that occur around it. It can also be seen as an author, affecting and sometimes creating cultural changes of its own accord. Gothic architecture is a style that has two forms. The first, Medieval Gothic architecture, narrates these changes through the architectural style that was produced in the period, while the second, Gothic Revival architecture, dictated the societal change that brought the style back to relevance. Medieval Gothic architecture rose from Romanesque architecture as something completely new and challenged the ideas of the time. It was not a planned structural form, but one that followed an idea that formed a building style around it. The Gothic Revival was not a new type of architectural style, but an idea that was brought about by and utilized the Gothic architectural form. During this period, architecture—instead of being designed by an idea born of societal change as Medieval Gothic architecture had been—became in itself a tool for societal change. The role of buildings and structural style became more highly regarded and was recognized as an important part of a culture and its ideals. It held the idea that a structure reminiscent of a better time could bring the morals and culture of that time into the present. Medieval Gothic architecture shows the mark that society can leave on architecture, while Gothic Revival architecture shows the mark that architecture can leave on society.

DURING THIS PERIOD, ARCHITECTURE—INSTEAD OF BEING DESIGNED BY AN IDEA BORN OF SOCIETAL CHANGE AS MEDIEVAL GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE HAD BEEN—BECAME IN ITSELF A TOOL FOR SOCIETAL CHANGE.

When one thinks of Gothic architecture, one's mind immediately jumps to churches and abbeys, immense in their verticality, with skeletal walls that are nearly nonexistent and filled with stained glass windows. One imagines the pointed arches, flying buttresses and delicate stonework rising to the heavens in sharp spires. However, the form of this architecture takes its shape not necessarily because that was the way the architect wanted it to look, but because of the technology that would allow his goals and ideas, specifically about art in monasteries, to be reached. The origin of the architectural style now termed "Gothic" is often attributed to Abbot Suger of the Abbey of St. Denis, located in what is now present-day Paris, France. Installed as Abbot in 1122, Suger addressed the ongoing controversy of monastic art through the renovations he made to his Abbey. Suger's time period marked one of the greatest periods of the growth of Western medieval art and architecture, and also one of greatest oppositions to this same artistic advancement. Monasticism was responsible for much of the production of art at this time. The use of artwork in monasticism was not based on doctrine but almost wholly on tradition. Church tradition allowed the use of art to commemorate and honor God and the saints; however, it rejected the use of precious materials or other marks of luxury. There were concerns that there would be "luxury as opposed to the suppression of the senses, materialism as opposed to spirituality and/or cost as opposed to simplicity and involuntary poverty."[2] In *Apologia ad Guillelmum*, Bernard of Angers wrote critically about monastic art saying that it could lead to "ritualism, materialism, dilution of monastic seclusion and cause spiritual distraction."[3] Suger was to counter this argument in his renovations of St. Denis and in doing so, create the incredible architecture that we now know as Gothic.

Suger's justification for his art was that there was a reciprocal relationship between the celestial and terrestrial. In his publication, *De Consecratione*, he explained: "it is necessary to proclaim God's generosity. This is essentially the returning to God of a part of what God has already given; and

one of the best ways of doing this is through art, particularly through the most precious materials possible."[4] On the door of St. Denis is the inscription:

> *Whosovever seeks to extol the glory of these doors, admire the craftsmanship, and not the gold or expense. The noble work is bright, but a work that is nobly bright should brighten minds, so that they may pass through…to the true light, where Christ is the true door…The dull mind rises to the truth through material things, and having seen this light arises from its former submission.*[5]

Suger's main focus of art in his abbey was the use of light, stemming from Dionysian writings. Use of light would become the driving force behind the architecture and structure of the building, and is the distinguishing factor that sets Gothic architecture apart from other styles both aesthetically and theologically. He agrees with Hugh of St. Victor, who writes of light in *De Sacramentis*, saying simply, "God is light."[6] Suger's goal was to reduce the matter of walls as much as possible so as to make them transparent and let in God's light.

The architectural aesthetic of St. Denis came secondary to the desire for more light and more dazzling expanses of stained glass. A skeletal structure was devised using the technology that would best allow the walls to become as thin and transparent as possible. Because of this, Suger's design of the structure can be thought of as nothing less than a practical approach to achieving his desired aesthetic. The pointed arch that is characteristic of Gothic architecture was used simply to satisfy the geometry of the vaulting. The vault rib allows the vault to be thinner and lighter and allows ease of construction.[7] A ribbed vault with pointed arches is more effective than a barrel vault, because the load of the vault is concentrated through the ribs onto piers at the corners, which can then be buttressed. This allows the walls under the vaulting to be replaced by glass. The main buttresses are pushed away from the walls of the nave in order to prevent shadow across the windows, and loads were transferred from the piers to the buttresses through small arches, now called flying buttresses. This practicality in structural design in combination with the emphasis on light created a graceful, almost skeletal architecture that was different from any seen before. A goal was set by Suger's ideas: to allow as much light as possible through the walls of the sacred space in order to be closer to God and transcend from a world of materiality to immateriality. This goal could only be achieved with certain techniques, which now define the Gothic architectural style. However, as Abbot Suger's St. Denis shows, it was not the actual building that defined the style, but the culture and ideals behind it that created the form.

Gothic architecture was termed as such in 1550, by Italian architect and painter Giorgio Vasari, who believed the Gothic style to be barbaric when compared to the classical style of the Roman Empire and the architecture of the Renaissance.[8] He associated the style to the Goths who, in his view, had been barbarian hoards that had invaded the shattered remains of the Roman Empire from the north and brought it to its end. Although the architecture had little to do with the Goths, Suger's style and the Teutonic race were forever linked by its new name. This led to a number of associations with this ethnic group during

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its use throughout the early Gothic Revival period along with its associations with the Middle Ages in general. The Gothic Revival displayed the use of a structure to create an idea, rather than the use of an idea to create a structure as Suger had done. During the very early revival period in the eighteenth century, Gothic ideals and architecture were used as a political tool, especially during war and rebellion. To the people of northern Europe, the Goths had not been mere barbarians, but were remembered as a "young and vigorous people opposing the empire which is moribund and corrupt." [9] This view was drawn from the sixth century work of Jordanes, the *Getica*, in which the Goths were said to have invaded the Roman Empire because of their love of liberty; they wanted to see the end of the Roman corruption and decadence, and would rather die than be enslaved by such a government.[10] They were said to be a warrior race that was nevertheless pure, with strong morals and an almost democratic system. In this way, Gothic buildings were a symbol the ideals of liberty and purity, and could be used to give heart to those taking part in rebellion.

Gothic Revival architecture did not reach its height as an object of social change until the mid 1800s when a man, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, brought it forward as a symbol of religious and moral purity. In his book, written in 1836, *Contrasts: or A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day*, Pugin wrote that Gothic architecture is uniquely Christian, and embodies all of the beliefs of the society that produced it: all of the beliefs that were lacking in nineteenth century society.[11] It was, to him, "a sacred style infused with inner truth, an architecture that did not merely evoke 'pleasing associations,' but that embodied in its very fabric, a metaphysical, divine reality."[12] Here again was the idea that the architectural style in itself could create social change. Pugin would work tirelessly to recreate the Medieval Gothic architecture in its purest form in order to also purify the morals and culture of his time.

In his book, Pugin contrasted the architecture and society of the Middle Ages to those of the nineteenth century. He depicted the oneness of Medieval culture, and the fractured culture of his day. He displayed the stark contrast between the splendid architecture and kind religious community of the Middle Ages and the brutal utilitarianism of a modern workhouse in *Contrasted Residences of the Poor*. He showed that "not just a style has gone, but a whole faith, a whole world," and it was his goal to bring that world back.[13] Pugin viewed the recent uses of Gothic architecture as false and insulting to the purity of its form. He wrote, "in these copying days…it is something to have an architect who has thoroughly studied the style in which he is to build that he can copy it correctly, and his buildings have not only the general form, but really the meaning and some of the spirit of the ancient ones."[14] Pugin concentrated on the details of the architecture, not just on the forms but also on their justification. He did not allow the design to stray from the necessary. In *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, he gave direction as to how to recreate Gothic architecture. He viewed decoration and construction to be interchangeable, proclaiming, "all ornament should consist of the essential construction of the building…[Gothic architecture] does not conceal her construction but beautifies it."[15] As his buildings were to shape society, Pugin was concerned that the building should be legible to the people who use it and illustrative of its purpose. The smallest detail needed to have a purpose as, to Pugin, this architecture embodied truth.

While Pugin's architecture may not have in itself brought about change in the society, his idea that a building could have the power to inspire societal change is one that took hold and expanded the Gothic Revival. His works, both literary and architectural, brought attention to the starkness and misery of a culture where "cash payment is the sole nexus between man and man," and brought a longing for the community and culture of the past.[16] People began to call for a campaign to secure working-class representation in parliament and for a general change in modern Britain. They saw that there was an "anti-society" instead of community, where working conditions were brutal and millions were unemployed and starving with no help from others.[17] With Pugin's encouragement, the medieval past started to become the vision for the future, and architecture held the power of reminding people of this.

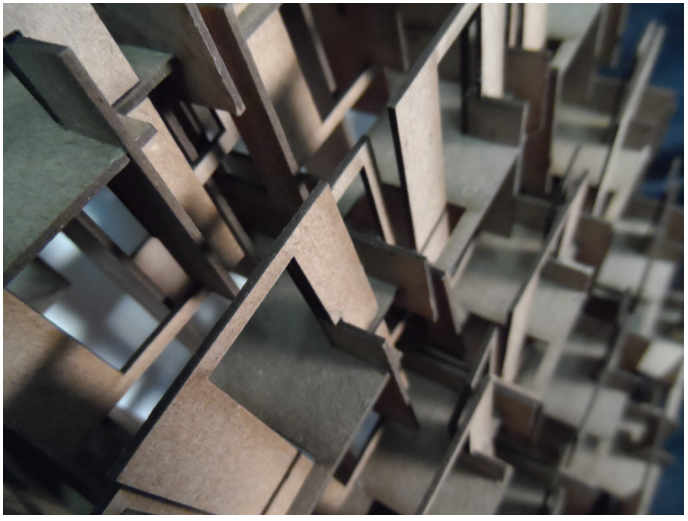
Through examination of Gothic architecture and its revival, it is plain to see that architecture, in addition to being pages of a book on which one can read the history and culture of past societies, can also wield the driving force of the author to affect change on a culture. Medieval Gothic architecture was created by an idea. The architecture was built around the beliefs of its architect. The structure was created to hold the idea that God is light and can be reached through material things. In this way, the ideals of the time can be read in the architectural style. Gothic Revival architecture was built to create an idea. The familiar structure took upon a role as an author and was used as an active tool to bring about societal change. It also emphasized the important role that architecture can play in a society. Architecture, although only having the simple role of acting as shelter, holds the power to affect the world just as much as the world affects it.

ARCHITECTURE

UNTITLED

Hannah Han

This project was for my ARCH 043 class with Professor Viscardi. A single unit was repeated on a diagonal slope to create the pattern. The medium I chose to work with was chipboard.



EASTON, PA
CITY HALL PROPOSAL

Justin Tagg

What is “Civic Architecture?”
It should express the values and cultural attitudes of humanity. This design uses the fundamental architectural element, the arch, to promote the notion of civic design while amplifying the arch’s inherent qualities of unification and centering. By abstracting the position and size of the masses that comprise the segments of the arch, the building takes the form of a clustered, city skyline where each segment turns to face the central plaza and main entrance. The exterior reflects the dichotomy of government. Contemporary fritted glass masses collide with the traditional brick masonry that clads the main rectangular structure and base level.